

The Experience of Community in Canadian Military Families: A Female Partners' Perspective

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SUMMARY

This is a condensed version of my thesis successfully defended Spring, 2004. The question of how Canadian military families experience community arose from my employment with the Halifax Military Family Resource Centre and my position in deployment services. The literature review covered the topics of Community, Military Families and Social Support. The emerging questions dealt with matters of meaning and perception of community for the female military partners. This led to a study using qualitative research. The paradigm guiding this thesis is Critical Theory. The ensuing deconstruction of military culture revealed pervasive ideologies impacting on the everyday lives of the military family. Ethnomethodology was used to focus on how members accomplish, manage and reproduce a sense of social structure. It is a subjective and interpretive study. The stories of 7 female military partners produce emerging data leading to categorized themes from which implications, conclusions and recommendations have been drawn.

EMERGENT DATA

Community

The seven women have been “married to the military” anywhere from 10-25 years and all have children. I asked each what their definition of community was and to describe the community where they were raised. It appears that, within the definition, there are 3 notions of community.

1. Community as *locale*; an actual geographic position as in a village, town or city.
2. The second is the notion of *community of service*. Examples would be religious orders, professional groups, the military; who follow particular philosophies and use specific codes of conduct (ethics) and standards of practice to guide their vocations.
3. The third is the notion of *community as mutuality* where people share norms, traditions and values in relationships that offer reciprocity and mutual support: our friends, families and neighbours.

In the interviews, community was about relationships and constancy, location to a degree, but the relationships make it meaningful. There are layers to community that involve the public and private spheres. For these individuals there exists their neighbourhood community, their community of personal friends and their military community. They look to each of these groups depending on what is happening in their situation at particular times i.e. the military community plays a larger role during deployments. Community is about sharing a history and having a sense of identity. Private married quarters (PMQ's) were both a good and bad experience. My observation is that, for the most part they were a convenience as an insular ready-made

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community but not vital to the sense of community. This surprised me. It appears there is a relationship between what was experienced as a community in their childhood and what is expected of community as an adult. A *gap* between expectations and reality causes a discomfort/dissatisfaction.

Social Support

All seven participants agree that nobody understands what the military lifestyle is like as well as another military partner. The sharing of the experience creates an unspoken knowledge and a sense of identity. Changes over time have increased the level of satisfaction. However, some past experiences have left some anger and some bitterness. The now familiar notion of accommodation and the ideologically inspired *self-reliance* did not come easily. Support policies can be convoluted, unhelpful and short sighted. There is an element of surprise when the expected support is denied because of power-relations. Families have different needs at different times. Having a variety of resources and being able to pick and choose what is appropriate or helpful at the time is appreciated.

Participants' Recommendations for Change

When I came to work at the MFRC, my supervisor told me that, in deployment services, our job was to help keep families and individuals informed, supported and connected. The changes and improvements wanted fall into the categories of information, communication and support. Improve telephone systems and increase the frequency of calls. Continue to improve e-mail systems. Find ways of getting information to military partners without going through the Canadian Forces (CF) member so they can decide for themselves what resources to take advantage of. Develop a peer-mentoring program. Make sure all elements of service receive the same support, i.e. submariners and reservists concerns regarding communication, homecoming celebrations and Family Networks. Educate the CF member also about the *cycle of deployment* so the responsibility doesn't rest solely on the female partner.

CONCLUSIONS

"L.S. Bloggins, if the Navy wanted you to have a wife, it would have issued you one!"

"Cpl. Bloggins, the military is not a democracy. We are here to protect it, not participate in it!"

"Pte. Bloggins, this is the Canadian Army, not the Salvation Army!"

There is still a lingering attitude toward supportive family policy. However, there have been significant improvements in the *quality of life* for military families. Make no mistake, if it wasn't serving the military's purposes, they probably wouldn't have occurred. The military's #1 commitment is to its mission. Without a doubt, people are the most definitive component in the participants' notion of community. The social network where informal support exists is made up of those with whom they share common values and lifestyle. It is on this level that the participants have found a sense of belonging that is integral to the formation of community.

What is the importance of formal and informal support as experienced by these women? It is interesting to see the changes over time in the lifestyle of military partners. The three women with the longest history began living the military lifestyle at a time of change. From policy that recognized only legally married heterosexual couples as eligible for military housing to policy supporting same-sex relationships; from 16 weeks maternity leave to one year parental leave that can be shared by partners; more compassion for family crises where it concerns repatriation: the emergence of military family resource centres; the closing of base housing; females are not only sailing during deployment but actually holding command; technology has evolved to such a degree that communication with partners during deployments can occur several times a day; this is a list of

some of the formal changes brought forward by the military in response to the needs of military families in which I include the military member.

The importance of informal support in the lives of these participants was primary in the interviews. Six of the seven participants had significant stories of how it was and is experienced. All the participants extol the value and benefits of becoming involved in whatever your community is. Belonging is not only about receiving support and being part of a group; it is about being able and encouraged to participate meaningfully in the organization of that community.

How is the concept of capacity building facilitated in a community that has no specific geographic location? The word *network* has been used in many places in this research. It refers to an assemblage of talents and expertise from different areas gathered for the purpose of achieving a mutual goal. There are formal networks, as in the case of larger community organizations working together for a common purpose and there are smaller more informal networks of individuals who support one another in living, working and playing together. This research shows examples of both, even if in their infancy.

The participants note some limitations. To begin, there is a stigma attached to participation that sees the group as composed of *needy* or weak individuals. This possibly limits the numbers attending. Although military rank plays no part in the organization of the network, the group holds positions of chair, vice chair and secretary. This creates its own hierarchical structure, which potentially stifles the kind of empowering process that is intended. The final limitation noted is that these networks begin with a deployment and end with a homecoming as if this is the only time this resource is useful. One participant says it perfectly; "...there are always issues when they're home and when they're not... it's not just when they're not around." With the dissolution of these networks at homecoming, these participants have moved into other areas of their communities. It appears that these women have found, perhaps, permeable boundaries in their various *layers* of community and move from one to the other according to their particular circumstances and requirements.

The importance of networks in building community capacity shouldn't be undervalued. Structured properly, they exhibit a community capacity model. Whether the collaborators are highly interdependent like deployment networks or more loosely formed, as in the MFRC's connection with civilian organizations, a sharing of leadership diminishes the power relations and in the more informal networks, fosters interpersonal relations (Bowen and Martin, 1998; Caswell, 2001; Kretzman and McKnight, 1996). As Mandell (2001) acknowledges, it is not always easy to achieve this empowering set-up especially when there are certain players who are not familiar or are resistant to the concept of community development through a capacity building mode. However, patience and recognizing the small steps forward are important elements in the process.

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Information

Information feeds our knowledge base and increases the ability to make better decisions. In the patriarchal culture of the military, information is very often on a *need to know* basis. The spill over to military partners is that the military member also has the power to decide what information is brought home. They are the gatekeepers for the information the military partner receives. As indicated in this study, military partners want the dissemination of information to come from a variety of sources so that they may make their own decision as to its value to their particular circumstances. The participants all have found a determination to go and get the information they need but arriving at this point was a bumpy road. It would seem that sharing information

equates to sharing control, not something the military does easily. An easier flow of information in the participants' initial years would have reduced some frustration and hardship. The importance of educating the serving member to living the military lifestyle also comes out of this study. One of the women was especially strong in her opinion that the responsibility for managing this lifestyle does not fall solely on the shoulders of the military partner. As she states, "They (the military) know war but they don't know peace". In other words there is another side of the military lifestyle besides the current mission. In terms of family readiness, having the member informed as well as the partner will benefit everyone. There is a marked improvement in the amount and kind of information available and it is valuable to military partners. I heard it voiced in an amusing way by an ex-military member who said to me, "You know, Bernie, wives are smarter than they used to be". Imagine that! They are becoming better informed which should increase their ability to be self-reliant; a characteristic the military hopes to encourage in terms of family readiness.

In making recommendations regarding information, I would not focus as much in the kind or amount; not because that isn't important, it is because that is a changing variable depending on specific circumstances. I see a need for addressing the attitude that providing information and resources to families allowing them some measure of autonomy is contrary to military beliefs. The military itself has to take responsibility in educating its members as to the value of information in the concept of family readiness. More programming directed toward the serving member increasing their awareness of family readiness is recommended. Support agencies have personnel trained in specialized fields who can present educative programs to military personnel. The recommendation is for the military to take advantage of that resource for themselves.

Recognizing that changing attitudes is a process over time, I also recommend finding as many ways as possible to bring information to families without relying on the military member to be the primary source of transmission. Due to privacy and confidentiality codes, direct contact with military partners and families is not always possible. Public access formats such as websites, community newspapers, newsletters and bulletin boards are key, in my opinion. Generous funding to allow the continuation, improvement and creation of new innovative methods of distributing various kinds of information is recommended. A better-informed community is a more capable community.

Communication

Communication is vital in this culture where separations are frequent and increasingly lengthy. Feeling connected to family, friends and loved ones helps maintain a level of comfort and security. The participants with a longer experience with the military life note how the changes in technology have improved their quality of life, especially during deployments and long work-related separations. This important is not only regarding the social-emotional aspect of life but also the practical-financial aspect. The participants were willing to pay large amounts of their monthly income to maintain telephone connection to the important people in their support network. There is some concern voiced from the military side that easier communication lines interferes with their capacity to monitor the state of mind of their military members. In their view, it is important to be aware of particular circumstances in the personal lives of its members to maintain control over and ensure the smooth completion of its mission. In this respect, communication is also linked to information and, again, the military shows its reluctance to relinquish control of how, what and when information should be released. Understandably, some kinds of information are better received when delivered in person by someone able to be supportive. However, I would believe that those circumstances would be relatively rare in an individual's everyday routine. I also believe that most military partners would choose the more traditional route of relaying information of a serious nature. In this study, the participants and their partners have acknowledged less stress in their separations because of increased communication. The exception in this study might be the submariners' families who have little communication with each other during deployments. They

understand that the secrecy required for submariners to achieve their mission precludes the kind of communication enjoyed by other elements of the military. However, I did sense from the participant who is a submariner's spouse that perhaps other ways of staying connected could be augmented or developed to compensate for those kinds of communication not available to them. For this group who have some particular differences in their lifestyle, more frequent briefings from the military regarding the deployment or the opportunity to record messages more often would help families feel more connected. Perhaps the issuance of phone cards allowing for time allotted communication for those times when submariners are in port would ease the financial consideration and show some inclusiveness in the way other elements have for communicating with their families. In this work it is clear to me that better communication has decreased the level of stress due to loneliness for these participants. Perceiving less stress in this way increases the capability of handling other challenging circumstances as they might occur. I recommend continued development of creative methods of staying connected; make it often, inexpensive and available to all elements of the military. The support it will give to individuals and families will go a long way to raising the level of satisfaction in living in this military community.

Informal Support

Along with feeling there is enough information and resources to support them in their military lifestyle, including maintaining communication with their loved ones, these participants overwhelmingly acknowledge their reliance on and appreciation for the informal support that comes with sharing this common lifestyle. Being with others who understand the intricacies eliminates explaining and sometimes defending what it is to be part of this community. The participants in this study seem to have found a balance between their civilian community and their military community depending on their specific interests and requirements. Not surprisingly, deployments and long work-related separations are times when gathering together as a military community gives comfort and opportunity. Many military partners use this change in family routine to take on projects to enhance their personal experience. The creation of environments that foster the association of military partners for a positive experience of using their individual skills and talents would attract those who want to take advantage of those times to supplement their lives. As discussed in this thesis, there have been networks offered to the families of deployed units. These have been strictly social groups that organize entertainment for the families during the deployment. Most of the participants stated their enjoyment in participating and, to a degree, the opportunity it gave them to develop some skills associated with that kind of experience. It was also noted that this gathering could be made more worthwhile if it didn't start and stop with deployments and if the agenda included more than entertainment. I agree with both suggestions.

It is recognized, somewhat casually, that the military community accesses the MFRC more frequently during deployments. These social networks could also form a venue for sharing information related to other areas of concern for military partners. Employment was an issue in each interview with a varying degree of significance. Coming together as a network during deployment may offer more time to focus on what is needed to augment skills necessary to further the partner's employment related goals. The networks bring a wealth of experience in how military life is lived. Channelling that resource into a peer-mentoring program would promote skill development and an information provider with impact. Combining the social aspect of networks with information and skill building will benefit the military partner and enhance the social capital of the community. I recommend that networks be re-worked to allow them to be continuous in their functioning. It is, potentially, the most significant method of gathering military partners that the MFRC has and I believe military partners would benefit more if they were able to move in and out of a network according to their circumstances at any given time. Having one network takes away from the divisiveness created by having each unit forming its own group. It would allow for those units who have trouble getting started to participate regardless of the level of interest in that particular unit. Some groups have more funding allotted from their

unit and thus can organize activities that either cost more or they can better afford to subsidize the event. It can create a situation of *haves* and *have not* in a community striving for that all-important cohesiveness. This kind of funding potentially means more control by the military on how it is spent and the group may not become as self-managing as intended.

The funding available to operate networks has been a determining factor. Family networks have been dependant on Maritime Forces Atlantic and the individual units deploying for thirty days or more consecutive days. This eliminates whole groups of families whose partners are deployed for much of the year but never more than thirty days at a time. I have been told that these shorter deployments are often more disruptive to family life than the longer ones. Even communication can be disrupted because on board e-mail service and phone connection may only be available at certain times. The informal social support found in these networks may be just as important during short deployments. The flux created with the starting and stopping of these individual networks breaks the connection that people make when they come together as a community. Allowing them to control their own entry into this association is more of an empowering experience.

Method for Change

How do the recommendations in this final chapter come to fruition? In addition to listening and responding to the community as in the community development model, building community capacity occurs through the interdependence of the three layers of community evidenced in this study. The families who make up the informal level can utilize the resource available to them in the form of support agencies, like the MFRC's to act on their behalf to communicate the areas of concern that might need to be addressed through the development of policy. In its capacity as community advocate, its expertise and professional underpinnings can translate the informal concerns into proposals for change. The military institution, in appreciating the important part the family plays in the formation of a strong, vibrant and capable community would benefit also from working with support agencies to create the kinds of policy that will encourage the growth of just such a community. These vertical linkages are a work in progress and the elements of loyalty and trust need to be discussed and encouraged. This will take time. In view of the fact that the geographic military communities are scarce, the partnering with civilian organizations to provide for the needs of the military family is also recommended.

Many of the recommendations I have discussed have seen some initiating, if not implemented, then at least under discussion. In arriving at the end of this study, I am encouraged that others in leading positions are finding the same direction for the military community of the 21st century as I have found in this research. As quality of life issues increase in importance in the military with regard to the families of military members, my hope is that this study will add to the knowledge base of research on Canadian military families and contribute to the process of creating relevant, meaningful family support policies. I also hope it will contribute to the mission of Canadian military family resource centres that "offer programs and services promoting healthy living for all who share the unique experience of military life" (mission statement of the Halifax Military Family Resource Centre).

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